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ARTICLE

## The Kairotic View of History in Thomas Pynchon's Novels

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The rhetorical concept of kairos (right timing, right proportion, time viewed qualitatively) can expand the understanding of the “points” or decisive moments in Pynchon’s historical novels. In addition to timeliness, kairos for theologians represents the intersection of the sacred with the profane. Kairos also provides insight into the novels’ affect, lending rhetorical force to the concept from Marx that “the point is to change [history].” Following the hiatus preceding *Vineland*, Pynchon’s global view of history becomes more restricted, with emphasis instead on smaller social enclaves and human connections.

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*"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."*

—Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

For some novelists, history serves as a backdrop for plots of romance or intrigue, reducing a different temporal setting essentially to decoration. Others treat history almost as hypostatized presence, adding another dimension to novelistic action and character. For these, history may be an oppressive presence: Joyce's Stephen Dedalus famously calls history "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," a phrase which could suitably apply to Pynchon's novels as well. In these, history is seen not as a continuous unfolding, but as a series of outbreaks, providing new meaning to Lukacs' characterization of historical novels as "artistic reflection[s] of ... social-historical transformations" (Shawn Smith 1).<sup>2</sup>

Of course, critics have long recognized Pynchon as a historical novelist.<sup>3</sup> His interest in history is signaled early in his career by Stencil's chapters in *V*, with development reaching epic proportions in *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day*.<sup>4</sup> It is more than artistic appropriation: Pynchon uses fiction as his way of attempting not only to reflect analytically upon history, but to perhaps change its direction, by alerting readers, through the means available in his art, to the present-day dominance of an official culture which both constrains individual agency and threatens our collective existence.

Official versions of history have long received Pynchon's scorn. Early in *GR* we encounter a paradigm, in the séance calling on Walter Rathenau, called the architect of the corporate state:

<sup>1</sup> "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Pointsman reflects early in *GR* on this view of history: "Will Postwar be nothing but 'events,' newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?" (*GR* 57).

<sup>3</sup> *Gravity's Rainbow* is "one of the great historical novels of our time," according to Tony Tanner (75). Titles of books by David Cowart and Shawn Smith, and articles by Amy J. Elias, Richard Poirier, Maximilian Heinrich, and many others, illustrate critics' 'interest in Pynchon and history.

<sup>4</sup> I will abbreviate the titles of Pynchon's novels, except for *V* and *Vineland*, after their first mention.

Why do they want Rathenau tonight? What did Caesar really whisper to his protégé as he fell? Et tu, Brute, the official lie, is about what you'd expect to get from them—it says exactly nothing. The moment of assassination is the moment when power and the ignorance of power come together, with Death as validator. When one speaks to the other then it is not to pass the time of day with et-tu-Brutes. What passes is a truth so terrible that history—at best a conspiracy, not always among gentlemen, to defraud—will never admit it. The truth will be repressed or in ages of particular elegance be disguised as something else. (167)

Pynchon here reinforces the dictum that history is written by the winners in a conspiratorial act of repression, disguising whatever revelations might have come in the moment. But if we attend to the key moment—in this example, that when “power and the ignorance of power come together, with Death as validator”—we may be able to understand and possibly mitigate its effects.

I hope here to point to an aspect of Pynchon's concern with history as event, through an ancient Greek rhetorical term meaning time, *kairos*. The more familiar Greek word for time is *chronos*, but the English word masks a profound difference: whereas *chronos* is time as duration, or quantitative time, *kairos* is *this time*, now, qualitative time, the moment to act or risk losing all. Important as timing and proportion are, *kairos*' significance expands far beyond these. History in Pynchon's novels appears not as a continuous stream so much as a series of nodes or decision points, representing in incipient form various crises such as global warming or income inequality which we can see around us now, but which we have become inured to. Calling attention to these nodes is done perhaps in hopes that awareness of such nodes may help address past evils and anticipate new ones.

One example of a kairotic moment in Pynchon's works is in the Zone section of *GR*, in the narrator's meditation on Slothrop's ancestor William, author of the pamphlet *On Preterition*:

Could he have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy

had had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back—maybe that anarchist he met in Zürich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up.... (556; Ellipsis in original).

History as an abstraction is remote and unapproachable. It is through engagement with concrete, mostly fictional, characters in specific historical moments such as this, the chaotic Zone which preceded the postwar division of Europe, that readers can consider and respond to events, both cognitively and emotionally. Pynchon's early novels in particular present history through attention to the kairos of such moments.<sup>5</sup>

All novels feature qualitative moments of decision—this is unsurprising, since such moments are endemic to any *peripeteia* (reversal in a plot). In Pynchon's works, however, these carry additional thematic significance. They are configured as *points*, a British railroad term for the switch between tracks, with control over these exerted by a pointsman (presumably the source for Edward Pointsman, the novel's principal determinist). Viewing such metaphorical points in conjunction with kairos may give us a fresh appreciation of Pynchon's take on history. Initially this essay will explore the fluid, shifting meanings and significance of kairos, then apply the concept as a lens for viewing the specific treatment of history in Pynchon's works.

### **The importance of Kairos' various meanings**

Attention to kairos in conjunction with Pynchon's novels is timely, as the term has come to renewed attention among rhetoricians in the last few decades, in conjunction with new interest in the Sophists. The related term, *chronos*, is more familiar

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<sup>5</sup> In his review of *AtD*, Cowart describes its topic as "American promise and its betrayal"—without exaggeration, that phrase could be applied to his entire body of work.

from derivatives in English and other languages (chronic, chronology, for example); it would be interesting to speculate why chronos has remained prominent, linguistically, but not kairos. Chronos was passed over, perhaps, in the service of seeing time as a continuum rather than as a series of potentially disruptive events.<sup>6</sup>

Kairos was key to the methods and underlying philosophies of Sophists such as Gorgias or Protagoras, who were attacked by Plato and his successors; they saw the Sophists as using cheap debating tricks, rather than pursuing truth through dialectic.<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarship has worked to redeem the Sophists' reputation, through reconsidering their interest in kairos as more than just seizing the opportunistic moment for intervention. James Kinneavy's 1986 article asserted the term's importance in defining it as "the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something" (80). "Right" here pertains to the "situational context," (83) or "the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved" (84). Phillip Sipiora additionally points out that kairos can be translated in different contexts as "symmetry,' propriety,' 'occasion,' 'due measure,' 'fitness,' 'tact,' 'decorum,' 'convenience,' 'proportion,' 'fruit,' 'profit,' and 'wise moderation'" (1). Kairos' varied meanings have evolved over time.<sup>8</sup>

Common to these meanings is the presence of alternatives which must be judged in context. As John E. Smith explains, "the term *kairos* points to ... a season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen just at 'any time,' but only at *that* time, to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur" (47; italics in original). Sensitivity to timing and proportion in context, then, goes beyond

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan Tepper observes that "*Kairos* is ... the qualitative, experiential and particular element or face of any given moment of time" (6).

<sup>7</sup> See Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric*.

<sup>8</sup> Kairos' earliest extant appearance, according to Richard Onians, is in *The Iliad*, referring to a gap in armor vulnerable to a well-placed arrow—in other words, a time-limited opportunity. A related word, different only in a diacritical mark, pertains to the opening through which the thread must move in weaving. The interplay between these two senses is significant in deciding whether the moment is or is not subject to the agent's control. Later, kairos becomes a metaphorical opening, created or simply available, for rhetorical intervention to win an argument.

calculations about the best way to win an argument, and for some of the Sophists kairos became the basis of a philosophy of life, to be attuned to moments of crisis at a time when there is exigency (the possibility of making a difference), even when it is not possible to know outcomes with certainty—"at a moment of danger," as Benjamin phrases it (255). We can see Pynchon's novels themselves, not merely the actions of his characters, as arising from and addressing such periods of danger. Whether the salient context is imminent nuclear holocaust in *GR's* 1973, cultural exhaustion in *V's* 1963, Reaganite repression in *Vineland's* 1990, American complicity in colonialism as part of the context for *M&D* in 1997, the attenuation of labor and democratic action in *AtD's* 2006, or cyberwarfare and military over-reaction in *Bleeding Edge's* 2013, cultural crises are the inescapable backdrop to Pynchon's novels, whether set in the historical past or in the more recent aftermath of an epochal attack on 9/11. These crises have mostly been anticipatory, in contrast to what Benjamin experienced under Hitler, but they serve no less as warnings.<sup>9</sup>

An additional meaning of kairos emerged a few centuries after the Sophists, in the Septuagint and New Testament. For example, in Ecclesiastes, kairos is translated as time: "To every thing there is a season, and a time [kairos] to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted." In the New Testament, kairos is the key word in phrases such as "the time is fulfilled," or "the Kingdom of God is at hand," and is exemplified through the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts of the Apostles. In the Book of Revelation, the term refers explicitly to the day of judgment.<sup>10</sup> Kairos in such passages refers not just to necessary and consequential decisions by individuals in appropriate contexts, but more crucially to God's intervention in human affairs. The theological ramifications of kairos have been explored most fully by Paul Tillich, who sees kairos as no less than the immanence of the eternal in the temporal. Tillich, according to John E. Smith, considers Christ's incarnation to be the basis of

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<sup>9</sup> On Pynchon's indirectness, see David Cowart: "Both [*AtD.* and *V.*] treat the Great War, that fulcrum of the twentieth century, with artful discretion." (170) Cowart notes the timeliness of Pynchon's novels with respect to current events (203).

<sup>10</sup> On this aspect of kairos, see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*.

an “interpretation of history, in which the dynamic is found in those individuals and movements that seek to identify the opportunity in some crucial juncture of history and to seize it in the form of transformatory [sic] action undertaken in the name of an idea” (55–56).

Transformation through revelation is very much part of *The Crying of Lot 49*, in the many passages which anticipate apocalypse. Pynchon is careful, however, to frame the potential for revelation in the context of the perceptions of unreliable characters. We may sympathize more with the likes of Mucho Maas (on acid), John Nefastis, or Dr. Hilarius' seekers after “the bridge inward” (8) if we reflect on the Sophists' argument that we reside in a probabilistic universe, in which it is impossible to know with certainty what to do. Kairos as the moment of decision depends in part upon a sense of timing. Sophists argue that this aspect of kairos depends upon a developed sense of justice: “Pythagoras and his school gave further complexity to the concept of *kairos*, linking it closely with the basis of all virtue, particularly justice, and consequently with civic education” (Kinneavy 81; italics in original). Gorgias was engaged in a “search for truth and ethical communication in a relativistic world... It is from such a philosophy of balance and harmony embodied in *kairos* that Gorgias and other sophists [sic] derive their concept of adapting persuasive discourse to the particular circumstances of each discourse act” (Helsley 371; italics in original).<sup>11</sup> This aspect of kairos underscores the ethical imperative behind Pynchon's interest in historical nodes.

Failure to act at a kairotic moment can itself be an unjust act. In Pynchon's works, characters are repeatedly placed in circumstances in which they must act, without foreknowledge of results. Oedipa seizes the moment at many key points in *The Crying of Lot 49*; Slothrop often fails to do so (for example, in his encounter with Bianca), and thus is designated as a “glozing neuter.” Appropriate actions are an ethical responsibility, and the working-out of the plots through these means illustrates for Pynchon's readers the urgency of remaining attentive to our own non-fictional choices. It is in this way that he is a deeply ethical novelist.

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<sup>11</sup> Kairos becomes the key term for Gorgias, as the basis for becoming reconciled to “the conflict between order and chaos the rhythm of which traverses the essence of the universe” (Untersteiner 176).



Other aspects of kairos pertain to the aesthetic dimension of art works and readers' affective responses, which we will consider below after examining more of the historical decision points in Pynchon's novels. So far, the treatment of kairos has focused more on *49* and *GR*. Pynchon's treatment of history, however, changes in *Vineland* and subsequently. The potential of *GR*'s anarchic Zone for reversing "the waste of it" resulted only in the Cold War realignment, with its potential for nuclear annihilation, and the actual reassertion of corporate/military surveillance and control, threats which could be countered only spasmodically by any Counterforce. After *GR*, Pynchon's novels place less weight on the potential for addressing the direction of history writ large, focusing instead on smaller, more localized, communal and personal relationships in enclaves or bubbles which are relatively isolated from the overall trend. A brief look at kairotic moments throughout Pynchon's novels can serve as illustration.

### **Kairotic moments in Pynchon's novels**

In the "fork in the road" passage from *GR*, the road not taken would have led to an essentially democratic ethos, extending mercy to those for whom Pynchon shows great compassion throughout his works, those he calls the "preterite." That path was neglected in favor of an anti-democratic desire for power aligned with corporatism and control, represented by figures such as Pierce Inverarity in *49*, "The Firm," IG Farben, Clive Mossmoon, et al. in *GR*, the Royal Society in *M&D*, or Scarsdale Vibe in *AtD*. The individuals in this process are fallible—Ned Pointsman's career illustrates that—but the general tendency holds. ("We're all going to fail," says Sir Marcus, "but the operation won't." [GR 627]) Events in history may be largely random, but as with casino games, the odds are with the house.

Pynchon comes to a sense of history as a succession of kairotic events most fully in *GR*, but history is an obvious concern of his, even if not fully worked out previously. *V.* anticipates history as event to some extent through its setting at past intervals, structured around a series of minor crises at intervals ranging from 1898 to 1943 and up to the novel's present in 1956. The view of history in Pynchon's first novel is suspended between two perspectives not entirely reconciled. The Profane

chapters illustrate a drift toward the inanimate consistent with the novel's conceit of social entropy: "None of you have very far to go," SHROUD tells Profane. Alongside this narrative of steady decline is an alternative theory posed by Fausto Maijstral, who argues that history is a narrative imposed upon brute fact in order to make sense of a world which "simply doesn't care," as the famous almanac passage has it. Both views of history are unremittingly pessimistic, with the novel's only counters being McClintic Sphere's mantra, "Keep cool, but care," and several timely acts of kindness from characters such as Paola and Rachel.

Suspension between alternatives is of course the situation faced by Oedipa at the close of *49*, in which there is either the revelation of "some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there [i]s just America" (151). She emerges from the metaphorical tower at the end of chapter one to make a series of time- and context-sensitive decisions, following a trail of clues which may be random or may be breadcrumbs leading to confirming the existence of Tristero. Kairos in the sense of hierophany (the manifestation of the sacred) is present in *49's* teasing prospects of revelation, such as Oedipa's being positioned on the cusp of an "odd, religious instant," with "a revelation [trembling] just past the threshold of her understanding" (14). The final kairotic moment would be the appearance of what may be an agent of Tristero, after the novel's end.

As we move from *V.* through *49* to *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon invites us to contemplate the possibility of a road back to the potential of an idealized democratic vision, one which recognizes America's function as grounded in utopian potential and still somehow open to attainment. At the same time as such a possibility is hinted at, it is given ironic distance through the novels' components of fantasy and irrealism. Already in *GR*, the component of pessimism increases: Slothrop cannot actually reverse the consequences of the past kairos and use the freedom of the Zone's chaos to produce more mercy in the name of Judas (or, less specifically, find the way back to the promise of America). Rather, by the novel's end, he has turned his back upon the potential for escape, and has been broken into various personae; and the "dialogue of domination and freedom" (Herman and Weisenburger 5) continues into the novel's 1973 present, and forward into *Vineland* and its successors.

In the later novels, Pynchon's attention turns away to some extent from fantasy as a counter to the brutality of history and entropic decline, looking instead in more detail at social and political mechanisms—still connected to kairotic choice throughout, but underplaying the prospects of revelation distantly presented in *49*. In the next novel after the 17-year hiatus following *GR*, the historical framework narrows and the three shorter novels (apart from *49*) read more as commentary upon contemporary America than as historical reflection. Late in *Vineland*, history does receive thematic treatment in patriarch Jess Traverse's reading from Emerson by way of William James:

“Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil.” He had a way of delivering it that always got them going, and Eula wouldn't take her eyes off him. (369)

As with the intimations of revelation in *49*, Traverse's optimism is confined to that character, rather than receiving authorial confirmation. This passage does, however, serve to rebut the sort of determinist view of history voiced in *GR* by Pointsman: Amy Elias notes that “To believe that history is a series of inevitable and indisputable facts that add up to a narrative of Western progress is, for Pynchon, both to standardize and to colonize history and to make it congenial to totalitarian, or just oppressively uniform, world views and seemingly determined ends.” (123) The passage does speak to the idea that kairos is dependent upon justice and the ultimate righting of wrongs.<sup>12</sup>

*Vineland* is succeeded by *M&D* (1997), which shares some of the kairotic views of history found in the first three novels, particularly in several dialogues which maintain

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<sup>12</sup> As with other names of Pynchon's characters, the Traverse family surname suggests a dialectical movement, meaning “travel across or through, move back and forth or sideways; as in skiing; light rays across a crystal; to make a study of; obstacle or adversity” (Merriam-Webster).

the wider overview of history to be found in *GR*, as, for example, in the epigraph from Rev<sup>d</sup> Cherrycoke's musings on Christ and history. The "Practitioners" of history, he says, must maintain a multiplicity of narratives, "a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common." (349) Pynchon calling Cherrycoke's work *Christ and History* echoes Tillich, who sees Christ's incarnation as the disruption of history through the intervention of divinity, or the eternal becoming immanent. The novel's other reflection on history comes in dialogue between Ethelmer and Uncle Ives: Ethelmer reflects the sentiment of this quotation by asserting an 18th-century version of indeterminacy:

Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir'd, or coerc'd, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power,—who need but touch her, and all her Credit is in the instant vanish'd, as if it had never been. She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiterers, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry Radius, Masters of Disguise to provide her the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government. (350)

This passage moves us past the offhand remark in *GR* that, "like Lord Acton always sez, History is not woven by innocent hands." (277) It offers a corrective through supplementary counterhistories by "fabulists and counterfeiterers".<sup>13</sup> As an advocate of a singular, deterministic History, Uncle Ives responds to Ethelmer with the threat of grounding, and the conversation then devolves into chat about *Hamlet* and the value of romances and novels. These two quotations taken together constitute an argument against a singular Official History aligned with eventual corporate control and restricted chances for freedom.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Elias to this point: "Sometimes with glee and sometimes with fury, [Pynchon] repeatedly attacks the Gradgrindian belief that 'facts are facts' and that they add up to a predictable and universally acceptable version of history." (124).

<sup>14</sup> See also Kathryn Hume, who introduces *M&D* as Pynchon's way of taking us back to a fork in the road (59).

All of Pynchon's novels include outbreaks of the improbable, explained in *GR* as charismatic outbreaks or instances of Gödel's theorem; these serve in *M&D* as "more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever," as Rev<sup>d</sup> Cherrycoke puts it (349). Rather than writing a corrective Real History, Pynchon here offers not so much a charismatic eruption into history, in the manner of *49*'s teasing revelations, or a corrective along the lines of Slothrop's mercy in the name of Judas (i.e., the preterite reclaiming the narrative), as a playful reimagining of official American history, in combination with a more humanized and magically realistic account of the drawing of the Line. The Line's imagined extension late in the novel represents an early stage of Manifest Destiny, presented in parallel with ludic features of counternarratives being sustained as part of Rev<sup>d</sup> Cherrycoke's tangle of lines.

Next in sequence of publication is *AtD*, which, like *M&D*, returns to an apparently less critical but in fact significant period. Whereas *M&D* is set both before and after the American Revolution, with implications for slavery, the Civil War, and the dispossession of Native Americans, *AtD* reaches from the 1890s to the 1920s, the period which saw the transition from agrarian to industrial society. The novel also makes indirect reference to World War I and directly treats the labor movement and the consolidation of the corporate state. As with *M&D*, a version of magical realism punctuates the novel, primarily associated with the metafictional and cross-generic Chums of Chance. Comic renditions of Ben Franklin and George Washington have their equivalents in the portrayal of Franz Ferdinand. "Ballad-Mongers and Cranks" are if anything even more evident in *AtD* than in *M&D*.

The apocalyptic anticipations in *49* return in a different sense in *AtD*. The title derives from several references in the King James Version of the Bible, the most relevant of which comes from 2 Peter 3:7: "But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men." The writer of the epistle denounces false prophets and apostasies, reminding his audience of past stories of God's vengeance when the moment came. Despite the similarity in the emphasis on the transformative moment, the difference from *49* is stark: there, Oedipa is opened

to the possibility of a new, visionary order, or insight into the infinite, closed off to her previously and perhaps still unavailable to her in the excluded middle. The social/political context hinted at in *49* is filled out and made concretely sinister in *AtD*, primarily through the figure of Scarsdale Vibe and those he talks with in the L.A.H.D.I.D.A. meeting.<sup>15</sup>

A word as common as “day” will of course have many occurrences in a novel of such length, and most of these are trivial, pointing to the ordinary territory of chronos. However, “against the day” is a reference to a specific kairotic day, one which disrupts the even flow of chronos. Day in this sense is an echo of the day of judgment, the end-time which gives meaning to the daily struggles of profane life. An early instance of this kairotic use of day appears in the context of the Chums’ visit to a secretive corner of the White City:

a separate, lampless world, out beyond some obscure threshold, with its own economic life, social habits and codes, aware of itself as having little if anything to do with the official Fair ... As if the half-light ... were not a simple scarcity of streetlamps but deliberately provided in the interests of mercy, as a necessary veiling of the faces here, which held an urgency somehow too intense for the full light of day. (22).

Exposure to “the full light of day” would reveal to “innocent American visitors” the reality of the White City on exhibit in the fair. The phrase may be in part a reference to the “path of the righteous” which (as in Proverbs 4:18) becomes visible, in contrast to the ways of the evil, bound in darkness; whiteness in Pynchon tends toward the forces of control and domination. A similar linkage between “the day” and revelation of the sinister underside of daily American reality occurs a few pages previously: “... somewhere among the tall smokestacks unceasingly vomiting black grease-smoke, the effluvia of butchery unremitting, into which the buildings of the leagues of city lying downwind retreated, like children into sleep which bringeth not reprieve from

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<sup>15</sup> See Cowart 167–70 for a more extended discussion of such sinister figures.

the day." (12)<sup>16</sup> *AtD* is closer than any of Pynchon's other novels, except for *49*, to the sense of kairos set out by Paul Tillich, the sense in which the eternal, figured forth as the day of judgment, hovers over and potentially transforms the quotidian.

*Inherent Vice* and *BE*, Pynchon's two latest novels, are comparable in length to *Vineland* and set in relatively recent periods (the 1970s for the first, the 2000s for the latter). The more recent settings tend to minimize the "fork in the road" effect. *IV* and *BE* tend to avoid such statements about history as are found in *GR* and *M&D*.<sup>17</sup> The relations between chronos and kairos continue in the novels' key terms: "inherent vice" is a phrase drawn from the insurance industry as a description of the natural tendency of objects to deteriorate, independently of external forces or accident. As such, it is a bridge between Pynchon's long-term interest in entropy and the concept of original sin. As for "bleeding edge", the phrase first appeared in 1983 to describe technologies so new as to involve risk of failure—that is, on the knife edge between success and failure. In addition to this kairotic significance of the term, the novel's focus on the 9/11 attacks is a similar look at potential catastrophe.

Pynchon's later novels display an overall tendency to pull back from ambitious, if playful, alternative accounts of historical moments, in favor of increasing concentration on social enclaves which may preserve or at least ameliorate people's lives, rather than attempting a global route back to the "points" as a way of reversing course. The overall political intent is not changed, however. Pynchon's earlier novels can of course be read as pessimistic about such correctives—it is a strain to find much optimism in the fates of Stencil, Profane, Slothrop, or even Oedipa. This pessimism is in keeping with the thematic use of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, trending toward greater chaos and correspondingly less usability; however, even with

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<sup>16</sup> Terry Reilly points to this passage as "yet another promise, possibility, or opportunity for human betterment disappointingly lost somewhere during the course of American history" (146).

<sup>17</sup> An exception to the relative absence of kairos may be the quasi-courtroom summary spoken by Sauncho: "... yet there is no avoiding time, the sea of time, the sea of memory and forgetfulness, the years of promise, gone and unrecoverable, of the land almost allowed to claim its better destiny, only to have the claim jumped by evildoers known all too well, and taken instead and held hostage to the future we must live in now forever." (341) The opportunity for change, in this formulation, is seized at the key moment by "evildoers" from the blur of chronos.

entropy there are smaller pockets of organization, of the sort to be found in Meatball Mulligan's move toward restoring some order at the end of "Entropy" (1984). We can see the increased emphasis in *Vineland* and beyond on individual moments of peace—the Traverse-Becker clan, several figures in *Against the Day*, Doc Sportello's and Maxine Tarnow's narratives, or the warmth exhibited between Mason and Dixon even as they extend the Line—as such gestures of optimistic if temporary resolution.

Some of the later novels' pessimism may come from increasing emphasis upon the pursuit of "mindless pleasures."<sup>18</sup> Increasingly, Pynchon's take on the powerless shifts from their being "preterite," i.e., passed over in the quasi-divine scheme of redemption and lacking agency, to being something closer to Orwell's proles. The powerless lack the will to effect change because we are bought off by cultural and social devices: television, particularly in *Vineland*; the internet in *BE*; and drugs and pop music and film and sex throughout. In a secular age, these temptations make up our version of the opiate of the people—mindless pleasures, already evident in *GR* but dominant in the later works.<sup>19</sup> These novels show a consistent movement away from the earlier hopeful belief in the possibility of averting disaster through attention at kairotic moments, toward taking refuge in local pockets of resistance and the relative freedom of relative anonymity.

### **Kairos and affect**

Given the novels' pessimism about the potential for addressing present or looming catastrophe, we might wonder about the choice of medium. Why does Pynchon present what appear to be jeremiads about the dominant direction of modern and

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<sup>18</sup> See as well Heinrich: "Approaching American history as a continuing struggle of the people with the provided set of beliefs or ideology casts a different light on these historical crossroads. In *Against the Day*, Pynchon repeatedly shows that they often merely create a widely perceived 'sense of overture and possibility' (like the Tunguska event in the book) that will eventually pass, and the people will go 'back once again to seeking only orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep, to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day' (*AtD* 805), just as they did all along." (95)

<sup>19</sup> This point is raised by Thomas Schaub in discussing the California novels: in *Vineland*, "Pynchon places much of the onus for keeping things in place on the people themselves, by reason both of the ease with which they can be satisfied, and of the extent to which immediate sexual and material desires take precedence over long-term social change." (36)



contemporary culture in the guise of fiction? Wouldn't a nonfiction genre be more appropriate? Attention to *kairos* may be useful for addressing this question as well, because of the concept's relevance to aesthetics and to affect.

*Kairos* is deeply relevant to the act of creation, involving as it does attention to timing, proportion, and context. Untersteiner cites Pindar to this point: "The poet must set before himself as his aim the knowledge of the right moment (*καίροϛ*), that is, of the instant in which the intimate connection between things is realized, which is therefore 'the law which allows him to arrange the things he knows in the right place and in accordance with their significance.'" (111) Because proportionality is one of its aspects, Greeks saw *kairos* as fundamental to beauty (for example, in the architectural concept of the golden mean, the desirable middle between two extremes, mathematically represented by the irrational number *phi*). To the extent that novelists can be considered performers, pacing and proportionality go into their works' creation, contributing to what Kathleen Coessens terms "artistic resonance": "*Kairos* implies the convergence of 'knowing how' and 'knowing when,' the faculty of observing and realizing in any given case the available means of artistry" (279).

Thinking about aesthetics in fiction requires us to consider affect, and much of the affective quality of Pynchon's novels depends upon surprise. Unpredictability is present in Pynchon's novels not only as a theme but as part of what happens as we read, presenting the very experience of the reader as *kairotic*. Pynchon provides a model of such moments at the end of *49's* first chapter, when Oedipa encounters Remedios Varo's painting. This passage has been read as a mark of Oedipa's narcissistic confinement as the novel opens, in Kinneret-among-the-Pines, but it works as well as a *kairotic* encounter with the aesthetic other, a means of opening her perception to the wider world and social forces which she has yet to encounter.

Fundamental to *kairotic* events is their unpredictability: Moses does not expect to hear a Voice from a burning bush. It would be an overstatement to consider the outbreak of hierophany as a formula for countering the drift of history, but Pynchon's novels regularly feature the surprise of the non-rational or playful, which

is key to their affect.<sup>20</sup> The characters live for the most part under the Rainbow's message of "no surprise, no second chances, no return" (*GR* 212). However, the novels are full of surprises—charismatic outbreaks and 6-sigma improbabilities—familiar to readers.

Another source of affect is the practice of breaking the frame, most evident in *GR* but present in other novels as well. The fiction is further informed by surprising non-literary factors as well, including concepts from physics, mathematics, biology, chemistry, and information theory. These improbabilities do more than keep readers interested and entertained: they enact a degree of unpredictability as backdrop to the occasionally inserted authorial voice. In short, unpredictability becomes the basis of an affect in the fiction analogous to kairos at the diegetic level.

Gadamer observes that "The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real." (15) While much of what happens in Pynchon's novels cannot be called beautiful, what is at issue here has to do with the status of art, addressing its audience both cognitively and emotionally. The events described in this mode present the "historically other" to us through our subjective experience of the text. It comports well with Pynchon's aim to further the perception of history as subjective, needing to be tended by "Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry Radius."

Encountering a mixture of factual history and counterfactual imagined characters and events confronts readers with the same interpretive dilemmas faced by those in past eras, removing the suggestion from official histories of settled truth. The inclusion of some possibility of "the miraculous" offers the diversion of hope against the predations of time (chronos)—with the miraculous being the de-Christianized equivalent of the arrival of the eternal in the temporal.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See also Samuel Thomas: "the exercise of enlightened reason that the Line represents (which at its heart is the exercise of power) is constantly undercut by glimpses of 'other worlds'—secret carnivals, unreturnable gifts, modes of exchange that are not formally recognized in the official version of events, mysterious visitors who pass by 'as shadowy and serene as Deities of Forest or River.'" (26)

<sup>21</sup> Pynchon discusses this longing for the miraculous as part of the longing for a Badass to magically counter the incursions of technology in "Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?"

A quixotic hope for the miraculous is set against the probability of “no second chances, no return,” a perspective evident not only in the longer novels but in the shorter ones as well, as noted by Thomas Schaub: “Except for the way *Lot 49* engages the reader, the three novels set in California consistently portray the United States as a system from which there is no escape.” (40) I think we should give weight to the verb *engages* here and on beyond *49*: our engagement, at least imaginatively and perhaps politically, is the kairotic contribution to Pynchon's rhetorical purpose. If “the beach” in *IV* becomes a “momentary alternative” to the street and the hothouse, we should perhaps take solace in the existence of even momentary alternatives, such as the increased attention to social and familial bonds in the novels from the second half of Pynchon's career. *Vineland*, Shawn Smith notes, offers “family and communal bonds [as] our best defense against real manifestations of political authoritarianism.” (4) While the eponymous figures in *M&D* do indeed complete their assigned Enlightenment project, the lingering impression from that novel is the bond between them, along with the familial atmosphere of Wicks Cherrycoke's scheherazadian storytelling around the hearth:

Let Judges judge, and Lawyers have their Day,  
 Yet soon or late, the Line will find its Way,  
 For Skies grow thick with aviating Swine,  
 Ere men pass up the chance to draw a Line. (*M&D* 257)

Similar points about the affect of familial warmth can be made about *IV* and *BE* and, with more complexity, *AtD*. Overall, more weight is placed, beginning with *Vineland*, on more localized social and familial enclaves, which cannot hope to overthrow the dominance of hegemony, but which offer clear-eyed opposition and the satisfactions of having at least tried.

Benjamin's Thesis XIV speaks to kairos through its German equivalent, *Jetztzeit* (“*now-ness*”): “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.” (261) To the extent that

there is reason for hope from these historical nodes viewed with attention to kairos, it comes from our sharpened perception of and engagement with such events within our own context. The presence of the *now* for Benjamin, his *Jetztzeit*, is at once philosophical and aesthetic:

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.... For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (255)

Marx famously observed that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” Pynchon’s evolving means of addressing history employs kairos in several senses to this purpose.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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